

THE DECLINE OF THE WEST?

Western Christian civilization has been reported to be falling for so long that it must have hit bottom by now. But I am not sure any more just when it really fell. Was it in 410 when the heretic Goths sacked Christian Rome, or in 1453 when the Turks took Constantinople. Was it in 1619 when the Thirty Years War tore Europe apart, tumbled theology from its throne and replaced Christendom with little nationalisms? Was it in 1905 when Japan sank the Russian fleet? Or seventy years later when America left Vietnam, and the Moslems discovered oil?

To tell the truth I am not sure that it has fallen at all, or is even about to fail. I realize, of course, that there are enough signs of doom around us to move the ^{happiest} of Western Christians to tears. Terrorism, pornography, timidity and greed, to say nothing of the cancer of unbelief and a failure of nerve in Christian mission. It is no use to try to deny the facts.

But facts do not, and never did speak for themselves, as the historian, J. M. Carr once observed. Millions of people have crossed the Rubicon, but only one of the crossings, Caesar's, came to be marked as a significant change in history. Civilizations rise and decline and rise again. Decline is not always collapse, and sometimes only time can tell the difference. So, though there are plenty of facts that seem to forebode decay in the West and the waning of Western Christianity,--I'll wait and see. No, that's not quite right either. I will work and pray with all my strength that it may not collapse.

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But what if it does? Is everything lost? Not if we share the Bible's view of history. One aspect of that is that the Bible does not root our Christian hope exclusively anywhere on this earth, east or west. If anything, insofar as the faith has geographic roots, they were in Asia. I wonder if there is, perhaps, some significance in the fact that when God sent his Son into the world, he sent him to be born where Asia meets Africa.

If the West crumbles, which God forbid, then it is only all the more urgent to shape up and toughen the Christian mission in the East--to put muscle and maturity into third-world missions and ~~the~~ tiny third-world churches buffeted on pagan seas. Which is one reason why I, a Western Christian, am in Asia, a continent which is still only 2% Christian but abounding with signs of hope, where I can work in one of the great theological seminaries of the world, in one of the fastest-growing churches, and where we are now beginning in a small, international way (at ACTS, the Asian Center for Theological Studies and Mission) to break Asian Christianity out of its self-consciously ~~denominational and~~ nationalistic moulds into a continent-wide base for global renewal in Christ.

-- Samuel Hugh Moffett
Seoul, Korea
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